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## 10. MIGRATORY WAGTAILS IN KERALA

In December 1961, Mr. P. V. George of Kerala who had earlier attended two of our BNHS/WHO Bird Migration Study field camps, observed vast numbers of migratory wagtails, mostly the Yellow (*Motacilla flava*), feeding regularly during daytime in the extensive dyked paddylands in the Kuttanad area of Vembanad Lake, Kerala, (c. 9° 20' N., 76° 38' E.). Every evening, an hour or so before sunset he noticed that the birds formed themselves into disorderly flocks or rabbles 200 or 300 feet up in the air and commuted in a south-easterly direction. With commendable enterprise and perseverance George and a companion decided to trail these flocks cross-country, through intervening canals over tortuous bands through paddy fields, and other obstacles, a mile or two further each evening, till on the 17th day they finally succeeded in running down one of the roosts in a sugarcane field at Kuttoor, near Thiruvalla, some 15 to 25 miles away. Here, in an area of about one acre of standing sugarcane Mr. George estimated a roosting concentration of 10 to 12 thousand birds; the actual number may

well be considerably higher. Presently they discovered several other such roosts in that area, all exclusively in standing sugarcane fields of the variety known as 'Java'. This variety is an upstanding cane with broad, robust, arching leaves for the birds to rest on, and comparatively free from prickly spines and saw-edging. Later, George and his companion discovered some more roosts in the Edanad area (near Chengannur) a few miles further south-east, where the concentrations of wagtails were even greater. Edanad is virtually an island of about 650 acres surrounded by the Pamba River. It has extensive sugarcane fields interspersed with patches under paddy and tapioca. The island is dotted about with the characteristic Kerala homesteads set amongst 'kampongs' of coconut and betelnut palms, jack fruit, kokam (*Garcinia*) and banana trees, and pepper vines. The arrival of the wagtails at dusk to roost in the sugarcane and their departure at dawn is a phenomenal spectacle. Around sunset, about 6.30 p.m. in February, the first scouts and small parties appear above the fields. The flocks swell as more and more birds arrive, till soon the sky overhead becomes a seething mass of undulating motes milling around in a disorderly rabble tier upon tier. They spread from horizon to horizon in numbers that defy estimation and can only be compared with locust swarms. Settling for the night commences just before dark and lasts for about 20 to 30 minutes from the first arrivals. Birds from the lower tiers drop directly into the cane from a height of 50 to 100 feet at a steep angle—first in 2s and 3s, then in dozens and scores—looking like a shower of falling leaves, and reminiscent also of wounded birds dropping to a 'browning' shot. Within 10 or 15 minutes of settling, complete silence prevails. The birds perch singly on the cane leaves and not huddled together. No noise or clamour emanates to betray the colossal hordes within; the acrid smell of their excreta is the only evidence. The departure of the birds in the morning is equally spectacular. At about 6.35 a.m. (when the light intensity is about the same as at roosting time) a solitary scout or small party flies out of, and 10-15 feet above, the standing sugarcane. This is the signal for the roosters. Presently other wisps, then flocks, then swarms, begin leaving the cane fields in quick succession. The noise of the rustling leaves as flock after flock takes off is like surf breaking on a sandy shore, or like an advancing rain storm over distant forest. The larger swarms at Edanad contained perhaps 5000, perhaps 20,000 birds, each. With several such swarms aloft in the sky, there was nothing but wagtails from horizon to horizon. The traffic rush lasted a full 25 minutes till the last party had left

at about 7 a.m. Thereafter only belated ones and twos continued for another 5 minutes or so. The total number leaving this cane patch of perhaps less than 10 acres must be quite quarter to half a million birds. The thought that this is but one of the many such roosts in Kerala—itsself but a minute dot in the birds' winter range—and that when they return to their breeding grounds the majority will pair, occupy individual territories and produce a family of 5 or 6 each, is staggering in its implications.

In 20 days' netting at Kuttoor and Edanad during January and February nearly 1900 Yellow Wagtails were ringed, mostly of the races *beema*, *thunbergi*, *melanogrisea*, and *simillima*. Among them were also a good number of *M. citreola* and a few (33) *Motacilla indica*—the Forest Wagtail. The last, of which 1 to 5 examples were taken each day, were sharing the roosts with the others. They probably came from the neighbouring homestead gardens where twos and threes were commonly to be met with feeding quietly on the ground in the shady 'kampongs'. Only a single recapture of a Yellow Wagtail was recorded. It was caught at the same roost where ringed exactly two weeks before. Owing to a shortage of trained hands the de-ticking could unfortunately only be done rather hurriedly and superficially. Even so, it is noteworthy that of over 1700 birds examined not a single one was found positive for ticks.

The occurrence of the Yellow Wagtails in such unsuspected abundance in Kerala is a new discovery. I certainly never came across anything like the scenes described above, during the ornithological survey of Travancore and Cochin in 1932-33.

33, PALI HILL,  
BANDRA,  
BOMBAY 50,  
March 6, 1962.

SÁLIM ALI